Bob Dylan in His Early Years: The Reinvention of Personal and Artistic Identity

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In October 2016 Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition," becoming the first creative artist working in the field of popular music to be recognized with the world's most prestigious honor for literary achievement (Nobel 2016). The reactions that appeared on social media and news outlets suggested that after some six decades of dealing with his work and his ever-present but constantly transforming persona, the world was mostly ready to relent and grant the 75-year singer-songwriter this recognition. Over the years, Dylan had received countless honorary degrees, industry, cultural, and civic awards, and he had amassed a personal fortune of several hundred million dollars as a result of record sales, copyright fees, touring income, and sales of merchandise including books of lyrics. In 2004, Dylan also became a best-selling author of non-fiction with the publication of his memoir *Chronicles, Volume One* (*Chronicles*). The inescapable question for anyone who wishes to explore the work of Dylan is "Which Bob Dylan?" As social critic and music historian Greil Marcus has commented about the works of Dylan in the 1960s, "The music carried an aura of familiarity, of unwritten traditions, and as deep a sense of recognition

[...] that was both historical and *sui generis*" (Marcus 2011, xxi). While it is clear that Dylan's prominence in the cultural landscape of the past century is secure, he is a unique figure and must be considered in ways that other artists heretofore have not required. Those who approach the study of what has come to be known as "Dylanology" must agree with his acquaintance Bernard Paturel, who is quoted as saying, "There's so many sides to Bob Dylan, he's round" (Shelton 11).

Ever since the 1970s there has been a steady and increasing flow of research and publication that mainly focuses on Dylan's biographical data and historical influences. Another type of research has been involved in close readings of Dylan's lyrics in an approach consistent with the New Criticism that was the leading form of literary analysis in English Departments in universities across the United States, and over the years the publication of major academic works by professors of literature served to solidify Dylan's place as a writer of lyrics that could be confidently placed in the realm of "Literature." Major works of literary scholarship by Day (1988), Gray (2000), Ricks (2003), and Scobie (1999) are clear examples of just how seriously Dylan was being taken in academia. After having personally nominated Dylan for Nobel Prize in Literature a dozen times over two decades, Professor Gordon Ball, noted Allen Ginsberg scholar, succinctly characterized the pervasive discomfort associated with accepting a popular music artist into the realm of serious literary consideration:

> Few would challenge Bob Dylan's "uncompromising integrity" in depicting the human predicament. Yet many may ask whether the Nobel Committee should break with perceived tradition and grant an award to someone seen largely as a writer and performer of song. Is Dylan's work truly of sufficient literary quality to join that of time-

> honored masters of the pen? (Ball 14)

The definitive answer to this question and that discomfort came when the prize was awarded to Dylan in 2016. Even though two weeks passed before Dylan even acknowledged the honor, in the end he graciously accepted the award and submitted the requisite lecture, which starts with characteristic humility and reserve:

> When I first received this Nobel Prize for Literature, I got to wondering exactly how my songs related to literature. I wanted to reflect on it and see where the connection was. I'm going to try to articulate that to you. And most likely it will go in a roundabout way, but I hope what I say will be worthwhile and purposeful. (Dylan 2017)

He goes on to discuss both his foundational literary and musical influences, which include an array of figures ranging from Herman Melville to Buddy Holly. The area of literary influences in Dylan's lyrics had been the focus of scrupulous scholarly attention for many years by the editor of the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, T.S. Eliot scholar Christopher Ricks, who maintains that Dylan is "the greatest living user of the English language" (*Radio Open Source*).

From his early days of acclaim as a folk singer declaiming protest songs that championed social justice to the mid-1960s as the reluctant "voice of his generation," Dylan has repeatedly reshaped his artistic and public image more dramatically than any other artistic figure in 20th Century American popular culture. This fact in itself would merit no honors or awards, of course, but in the unique case of Bob Dylan the poetic and musical artist, the fact of constant and willful "change" amounts to a reinvention of

personal identity that must be taken simultaneously as both intentional and spontaneous, suggesting strongly that what Dylan himself has referred to as "destiny" (*60 Minutes*) has in fact been born of "genius." And even more consequential in terms of musical and literary merit are the considerations of Dylan's evolution and influence as an artist who not only changed but paradoxically seemed to become more "himself" as he incorporated the musical and literary legacies of the English and American traditions and transformed them into something innovative and profoundly influential. It can be reasonably argued that no other 20th Century artist working in the medium of words (in the present case, lyrics) has approached Dylan's achievements in those areas, irrespective of fame, popularity, or status as a poet and author. In first considering the question of how to measure let alone characterize the nature of Dylan's source of creativity, perhaps we can find a helpful clue in a comment made by one of the key figures in the field of jazz music (that most inventive of spontaneous art forms), composer and pianist Thelonious Monk. When it comes to musical artists, he said, "A genius is the one most like himself" (Rix). In examining Dylan and the nature of his genius, assuming that we accept Monk's dictum, we must take into account the question of who Dylan was at various stages of his life and his artistic development, and we must somehow attempt to reconcile how a middle-class Jewish youth from rural Minnesota was able to take control of his identity and to repeatedly (and most often successfully) reshape himself.

Dylan's fellow Minnesotan F. Scott Fitzgerald himself created in Jay Gatsby a character who in many ways prefigured Dylan as an ambitious Midwesterner who goes East to New York City in order to make his dreams come true. In the case of Gatsby, however, the attempts to reshape himself lead to tragic results, primarily because he is unable or unwilling to incorporate the reality of his own past and instead strives through force of

his will to repeat it. The following exchange between narrator Nick Carraway and Gatsby in Chapter 6 of *The Great Gatsby* discloses the nature of Gatsby's ill-fated mission:

> 'I wouldn't ask too much of her,' I ventured. 'You can't repeat the past.'
> 'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!' He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand. 'I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before,' he said, nodding determinedly. 'She'll see.' (Fitzgerald 106).

Simply stated, Gatsby's tragic flaw is his inability to reconcile the past with the present or future. Instead of learning from what has come before, in his hubris, Gatsby lays claim to the realm of the gods as he sets out to turn back time and repeat what has come before, not only for himself but for everyone around him. His claims on the present are much like his empty mansion, all frame with nothing to fill the expansive cavity. Unlike Gatsby, from his early days Dylan was never actually attempting to repeat the past, and instead he set out to incorporate the essential elements of the words and music of the past (the legacy) from a broad range of genres in order to fuse them together for his own unique artistic creations. Perhaps Dylan's own lyrics from his 1965 song "She Belongs to Me" most succinctly indicate the mindset and discipline that are required when an artist sets out to use the past for his own purposes rather than to repeat the past. The lyrics begin thus:

> She's got everything she needs
> She's an artist, she don't look back
> She's got everything she needs

She's an artist, she don't look back
She can take the dark out of the nighttime
And paint the daytime black (Dylan 1965)

The bare simplicity of the words tend to deflect from the actual gravity of the statements Dylan is making in these lines, but the phrase "don't look back" has special significance in the context of what Dylan believes is required in order to become an artist. As opposed to a con-artist such as Jay Gatsby, Dylan is in his lyrics defining a creative artist as self-contained and self-possessed, and the artist by definition is looking forward as he creates, not back. The powers granted to such an artist (the one who does not attempt to repeat the past) are seemingly limitless, judging by the artist's power to transform the light of day into the black of night. Putting aside the obvious distinction between an actual living person and a fictional character, this point of reinventing oneself as opposed to repeating the past the essential difference between Robert Zimmerman, who renamed himself Bob Dylan, and James Gatz, who renamed himself Jay Gatsby. Dylan has always sought to reshape himself and reinvent himself by virtue of his recognition of and respect for the past, which have equipped him to create and recreate over so many decades. (Note: Although most critics have suggested that the song itself was written about one of Dylan's romantic partners such as folk singer Joan Baez, my own reading of the lyrics suggests that the song is an homage and tribute to St. Cecilia, the Catholic patron saint of music. Such a reading is consistent with Jewish-American singer-songwriter Paul Simon's 1969 song "Cecilia," which overtly beseeches the saint to return his powers of musical creation. I intend to pursue this topic more fully in future research.)

Those who have personally known Dylan best have revealed the same mercurial figure that the public has known in recordings, video, photographs,

and on the performance stages all over the globe. A telling example comes in the Martin Scorsese film *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*, as Irish folk singer Liam Clancy describes the artist he befriended and performed with in folk coffeehouses in New York City in the early 1960s:

> "In old Irish mythology, they talk about shape changers. Dylan changed voices. He changed images. It wasn't really necessary for him to be a definitive person. He was a receiver. He was possessed and he articulated what the rest of us wanted to say but couldn't say." (Scorsese 2005).

Throughout a professional career that now spans more than six decades, Dylan has assumed different shapes and presented varying images countless times. Of these shape-changing experiences, though, the most transformative for Dylan as a lyrical poet and musical artist (i.e., singer-songwriter) came between the years 1961 and 1966, when he went from epitomizing the American folk protest genre to largely discarding that guise and replacing it with an image of his own making, what might be described loosely as "the introspective yet visionary surrealist poet troubadour hippie prophet" version of Bob Dylan. Throughout this picaresque personal journey, the constant core of Dylan's artistic identity has been firmly rooted in his poetic sensibility. Regardless of considerations of any trends in prevailing styles or popular music forms, serious and sober consideration of his best creative work, the lyrics he composes as he writes his songs, consistently suggests that the more he changes, the more Dylan stays the same—which is to say, faithful and true to his poetic and musical muse.

In reviewing a chronology of Dylan in his first quarter-century, we are immediately struck by the unlikely facts of a middle-class, Midwestern son

of an electrical appliance dealer who became the most significant lyricist and musical composer that his country would produce in the 20th Century. From the start, we see a budding artist who searched for, recognized, appreciated, and then adapted the works of others for his own creative purposes. The genesis of my own interest came in a simple yet provocative remark Dylan himself made in an interview appearing in the 2019 documentary *Rolling Thunder Review: A Bob Dylan Story by Martin Scorsese:* "Life isn't about finding yourself or finding anything; life is about creating yourself" (Scorsese 2019). This is the sort of bare, bold observation that Dylan has made untold times in his career, a seemingly off-the-cuff "zen-like" insight that his loyal admirers have come to expect; and yet these words spoken by this particular creative artist happen to also express a hidden paradoxical irony: While it is well-established that Dylan has earned his musical and literary reputation throughout his lifetime based substantially on "finding" in the sense of borrowing, adapting, and even unabashedly plagiarizing the words and music of countless artists that went before him, in this case, the very quotation itself is a remark made famous first by fellow Nobel Laureate George Bernard Shaw. (Note: Adding to the irony is that there seems to be no authoritative source information to verify that the quotation was Shaw's original creation, and there is speculation that Shaw himself borrowed the words, possibly from 19th Century American poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox.) In the same fashion, anyone who looks closely at Dylan and his work will be faced immediately with a myriad of similar issues of provenance. When one considers the work of Dylan in terms of musical, literary, and cultural achievements and influence, then, what is a passable point of entry into this cryptic and confoundingly paradoxical figure? The present study deals with how in the early years of his career Dylan melded "discovery" and "invention" as he himself produced lyrics and music that would impact the arts, language, culture, and society of those

times and at least the next six decades. For this discussion, I will approach Dylan through an examination of his self-generated identity as it evolved in his early years. In order to provide some structural framework, I will present a highly selective chronology that focuses on early formative events in Dylan's life that reveal the shape-changing nature of the artist as well as a discussion of Dylan's reinvention of personal identity as expressed in his own words in interviews and his own recollections, commentary by those who knew him well, and a representative selection of lyrics that have been analyzed by respected literary critics which will underscore the remarkable transformation that Dylan from 1961 to 1966, from rustic folksinger to spokesman of the counterculture generation and then ultimately to revered poetic oracle.

On May 24, 1941, Robert Allen Zimmerman was born in Duluth, Minnesota. His grandparents were Jewish immigrants who had arrived in America around the turn of the century from present-day Ukraine and Lithuania, both families having escaped the anti-Semitic persecution that had swept across Eastern Europe. His parents (known as Abe and Beatty) were middle-class first-generation native-born Americans, and in 1941 Abe was working as a manager for Standard Oil in Duluth (Sounes 31-34). Then in 1948, the Zimmerman family moved to Hibbing, Minnesota, after Abe contracted polio. Abe left his job at Standard Oil and went into partnership with his brothers selling household appliances (Sounes 35-37). Bobby was raised in and lived in this small rural town until 1959. Among lasting influences was Bobby's passion for listening to late-night AM radio broadcasts of both recorded and live music performances that included country music from Nashville, jazz and blues from New Orleans, and rock 'n' roll records from stations in Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, and New York City (Sounes 41-43; Spitz 30-34). Of particular note is the effect that country music pioneer

Hank Williams had on Bobby: "The first time I heard Hank he was singing on the Grand Ole Opry, a Saturday night radio show broadcast out of Nashville. The sound of his voice went through me like an electric rod" (*Chronicles* 95). Even more influential, though, was the structure of the songs. Dylan describes the songwriting lessons he learned from listening to the songs of Hank Williams:

> In time, I became aware that in Hank's recorded songs were the archetype rules of poetic songwriting. The architectural forms are like marble pillars and they had to be there. Even his words—all of his syllables are divided up so they make perfect mathematical sense. You can learn a lot about the structure of songwriting by listening to his records, and I listened to them a lot and had them internalized (*Chronicles* 96).

Throughout his young life, Bobby showed interest in music and began to form groups with schoolmates, but he was discouraged from pursuing it as a career. During these formative years, he read a surprising range of classic works of literature including Voltaire, Rousseau, Locke, Montesquieu, and Martin Luther (*Chronicles* 30), and like all pupils in public schools in 1950s America, he learned the fundamentals of traditional American History in the classroom. In reading Dylan's own accounts as well as the recollections of his schoolmates from those days, it is clear that Bobby was in many ways a typical "all-American" boy of his age, but he happened to be a highly curious and sensitive thinker even from a young age. At a distance of some half a century, Dylan in his memoir recounts the paradoxical lessons that he and his contemporaries were learning simultaneously from textbooks and directly through public experience. As this was at the height of the Cold War, children were taught practical lessons about the global conflicts

of the era:

> In American History class, we were taught that commies couldn't destroy America with guns or bombs alone, that they would have to destroy the Constitution—the document that this country was founded upon. It didn't make any difference, though. When the drill sirens went off, you had to lay under your desk facedown, not a muscle quivering and not make any noise. As if this could save you from the bombs dropping. The threat of annihilation was a scary thing. (*Chronicles* 29-30)

The psychological effects of such experiences on a generation of American children cannot easily be identified or measured, but in the case of Dylan, there is little doubt they shaped the ideas and emotions that appear in a song such as "Masters of War" from 1963. The powerful protest song opens with these lines:

> Come you masters of war
> You that build all the guns
> You that build the death planes
> You that build the big bombs
> You that hide behind walls
> You that hide behind desks
> I just want you to know
> I can see through your masks (Dylan 1963)

One of the most significant early experiences for Bobby came in January 1959 when he attended one of the final live performances by Buddy Holly before the star's fatal plane crash on February 3rd. For American youth

interested in popular music in the 1950s, Holly was an alternative and more "authentic" version of Elvis Presley, and Holly was viewed by some as a more talented artist since he not only performed as lead singer and guitarist on stage, but significantly, he composed his own words and music. In his Nobel lecture, Dylan describes the experience of watching Holly on stage:

> He was powerful and electrifying and had a commanding presence. I was only six feet away. He was mesmerizing. Something about him seemed permanent, and he filled me with conviction. Then, out of the blue, the most uncanny thing happened. He looked me right straight dead in the eye, and he transmitted something. Something I didn't know what. And it gave me the chills. (Dylan 2017)

In the fall of 1959, Zimmerman enrolled at the University of Minnesota but never attended classes regularly, instead spending most days in "Dinky Town" cafes listening to and playing folk songs (Sounes 66-68). At university, he had no serious interest in his classes, and instead he spent his time with the bohemians and young intellectuals at coffeehouses and bookstores. He read Kerouac's *On the Road* and Beat poetry, but his true devotion was to folk music, especially that of Woody Guthrie. Folk music provided him with access to a "parallel universe" where he encountered "a culture with outlaw women, super thugs, demon lovers, and gospel truths...streets and valleys, rich peaty swamps, with landowners and oilmen, Stagger Lees, Pretty Pollys, and John Henrys" (*Chronicles* 235–36). He found that "Folk music was a reality of a more brilliant dimension. It exceeded all human understanding, and if it called out to you, you could disappear and be sucked into it" (*Chronicles* 236). Concerning the timing of his exposure to folk music, Dylan commented in 2014 that

> Folk music came at exactly the right time in my life. It wouldn't have happened ten years later, and ten years earlier I wouldn't have known what kind of songs those were. They were just so different than popular music. But it came at the right time, so I went that way. (Love, *AARP Interview*)

In his memoir, he explains that in folk music, "I could believe in the full spectrum of it and sing about it. It was so real, so more true to life than life itself. It was life magnified. Folk music was all I needed to exist" (*Chronicles* 236). From these words of recollection, it is apparent that Dylan would not simply attempt to vainly "repeat the past" as had Gatsby, but he would be using the preferments of the past to build upon and reshape his own identity and his own artistic creations.

After months spent mainly listening and performing in local coffeehouses, by late 1960 he had made the decision to go to New York to pursue a career as a recording artist, but first he returned to Hibbing to get his parents' permission. According to his father's account, "We made an agreement that he could have one year to do as he pleased, and if at the end of that year we were not satisfied with his progress, he'd go back to school" (Sounes 94). So in early 1961, he arrived in New York having already renamed himself "Bob Dylan," which he would formally adopt as his legal name the following year. In a rare television interview in 2004, he gave the following account of his change of name ("EB" stands for interviewer Ed Bradley, and "BD" for Bob Dylan):

> EB: So you didn't see yourself as Robert Zimmerman.
> BD: For some reason, you know, I never did.
> EB: Even before you started performing?

BD: Nah, even then. Some people get born, you know, with the wrong names, wrong parents. I mean, that happens.

EB: Tell me how you decided on Bob Dylan?

BD: You call yourself what you want to call yourself. This is the land of the free. (*60 Minutes*)

The question of how and why Dylan chose this new name and its spelling has been a matter of speculation and confusion for decades, but his first hometown girlfriend (named "Echo") has provided the most reliable account, in which in the spring of 1958 Bobby announced to her that he was going to be called "Bob Dylan" while holding a book of poems by Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, who had died in 1953 and was a popular tragic hero for American youth of a literary bent in the following years (Sounes 59-60). Dylan himself has said that he first considered using his middle name, "Allen" or a variant spelling such as "Allyn," but the strong "d" sounded better to him. He chose "Bob" instead of "Bobby" primarily, it seems, to differentiate himself from the already popular singer Bobby Darin (*Chronicles* 78-79). So, now as "Bob Dylan," the young man quickly established himself in Greenwich Village, New York City, as a promising new talent in acoustic folk music, and he soon signed a recording contract with legendary producer John Hammond of Columbia music. Just as had F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jay Gatsby, and Nick Carraway, Dylan left the Midwest and arrived in the East (specifically New York City) to see if his version of the American Dream could be realized. One is reminded of the words of Gatsby's nemesis Tom Buchanan, who scathingly describes Gatsby as "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (Fitzgerald 106). Just as Gatsby constructed a new identity for himself after having come out of "nowhere," it is clear that Dylan viewed his own persona as self-generated and self-directing. In his 1965 landmark song "Like A Rolling Stone," he asks questions that seem best directed inward, to be asked of himself:

How does it feel
How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone? (Dylan 1965)

In the case of Gatsby, the convoluted origin myths he shares about himself tend to justify Tom Buchanan's scornful derision, but with Dylan it is clear that he has not denied or repudiated his past as he reshapes his identity in the 1960s. Although the answer to the questions doesn't come in the lyrics of the song, those who read the lyrics and are familiar with the progress of Dylan's career from 1961 to 2021 can be confident that the writer himself knows well how it feels to be on his own, "with no direction home, like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone" since he has lived a personal and professional life that demonstrates that knowledge. One of the keys to approaching the poetics of Dylan, however, is to understand that he resists giving simplistic answers to the questions that appear in his work. In the 2004 interview with Ed Bradley, Dylan describes it himself:

EB: You use the word "destiny" over and over throughout the book. What does it mean to you?
BD: It's a feeling you have that you know something about yourself that nobody else does –the picture you have in your mind of what you're about will come true. It's kind of a thing you kind of have to keep to your own self, because it's a fragile feeling. And if you put it out there, somebody will kill it. So, it's best to keep that all inside. (*60 Minutes*)

While it is arguable whether the reclusive Dylan has kept it all inside, more than half a century after he became known "the voice of his generation" it is clear that at some stage in his early career, somewhere between 1962 and 1965, he reinvented himself and managed to transform the shape and direction of popular music, particularly in regard to its lyrical content. The remaining question for this present discussion is to attempt to identify when and how this transformation took place. At times, Dylan has given advance warning or has acknowledged his shape-shifting within the context of his own work, as in his 1965 song "Maggie's Farm." Here, in a song that drew on folk roots and set to the melody of a Chuck Berry song, Dylan directly addresses the point of shaping his own identity while being pressured to conform. Apparently referring to the displeasure he had caused by abandoning his perceived responsibilities as the unofficial leader of the burgeoning youth folk protest movement of the early 1960s, he declares that he has already moved on:

> Well, I try my best
> To be just like I am
> But everybody wants you
> To be just like them
> They say sing while you slave and I just get bored
> I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more (Dylan 1965)

With regard to being labeled "the voice of his generation," Dylan himself has consistently discounted and outright rejected such labels, most famously in the 2004 interview with Ed Bradley on *60 Minutes*.

> EB: I know that, and I accept, you don't see yourself as the voice of that generation, but some of your songs did stop people cold. And they

saw them as anthems, and they saw them as protest songs. It was important it their life, it sparked the movement. You may not have seen it that way, but that's the way it was for them. How do you reconcile those two things?

BD: My stuff were songs, you know? They weren't sermons. If you examine the songs, I don't believe you're gonna find anything in there that says that I'm a spokesman for anybody or anything really. (*60 Minutes*)

In spite of his protestations and apparent humility, if Dylan actually does believe that he wasn't the leading cultural figure representing youth and the key social justice movements of the 1960s, he is virtually alone in that assessment. In the same vein, Dylan was labeled or perhaps typecast as a folk singer of protests songs, and that initial image and persona were frozen in time for the greater part of the general public as well as the literary, social, and musical critical establishment. In his 2010 book *Bob Dylan in America* critic Sean Wilentz states

> He's the most important songwriter of the last 50 years, in a culture in which songwriting has always been a major force, a major component. Then there's the '60s. Dylan's work is indelibly linked to that time, in part because so much of his greatest work came out of '64, '65, '66. But the sixties became kind of a burden or a weight on the entire culture, certainly to people my age. It became transformed into something bigger than it was. It was thought of as *the revolution*. (Wilentz 106)

According to Dylan himself, a key breakthrough as a songwriter came in his first year in New York while listening to "Pirate Jenny," a Kurt Weill and Bertold Brecht song he heard at a Brecht production in a small theater on

Greenwich. He describes it as the moment when "My little shack in the universe was about to expand into some glorious cathedral, at least in songwriting terms" (*Chronicles* 272). As he tells it, as he analyzed "Pirate Jenny," he began to realize that

> it was the form, the free verse association, the structure and disregard for the known certainty of melodic patterns to make it seriously matter, give it its cutting edge. It also had the ideal chorus for the lyrics. I wanted to figure out how to manipulate and control this particular structure and form which I knew was the key that gave "Pirate Jenny" its resilience and outrageous power. (*Chronicles* 275–76)

If we search among the vast body of Dylan's work from the early to mid-1960s for a definitive piece of documentation of his most profound reinvention, that is from popular folk revival protest singer to outstanding poet-lyricist of his generation, the 1963 song "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" emerges as delineating one incarnation from the other. The second verse displays the newfound poetic vision that Dylan could now communicate:

> Oh, what did you see, my blue-eyed son?
> Oh, what did you see, my darling young one?
> I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it
> I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it
> I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin'
> I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin'
> I saw a white ladder all covered with water
> I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken
> I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children
> And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard

> And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall (Dylan 1963)

In this song we encounter lyrics of a depth and maturity that transcend Dylan's previous protest songs and give notice of somber, even apocalyptic, set of concerns. University of California professor of history Brian Lloyd has thus described "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" in terms of its intellectual, political, social, and historical contexts:

> The song paints an impressionistic portrait of generalized chaos, with randomly sequenced premonitions of disaster and redemption filling out verses of varying lengths, each one culminating in a chorus designed not for group singing but for levying a solitary curse on the whole blasted landscape. Images of personal suffering and striving are interspersed with glimpses of poverty, racial injustice, environmental degradation, militarism, and repression. (Lloyd 2014).

As for its reception, the song motivated Canadian poet Leonard Cohen to begin writing songs (Shelton 155), and Beat poet Allen Ginsberg wept with the knowledge that a new generation would be carrying on the modern American poetic tradition (Wilentz 69). In regard to our present concerns with Dylan's reinvention of identity, it becomes clear that even beyond the stylistic and topical progression and development that we might expect in celebrated musical and literary artists as they emerge on the scene and come to terms with their fame and elevated social standing, in the case of Dylan the astounding flash of brilliance as a poet that is exhibited in "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" signals the remarkable transformation he undergoes in this period between 1961 and 1966. It should be noted that at the 2016 Nobel Prize Ceremony in Stockholm in December that year, at Dylan's request (in his absence) poet and musician Patti Smith sang "A Hard

Rain's a-Gonna Fall" with orchestral accompaniment (Nobel 2016).

The present discussion has attempted to locate an appropriate point of entry into understanding the nature of Dylan's early self-reinvention in terms of his work as not only a musical artist but as a significant poet and writer. Now as we enter the third decade of the 21st Century, many social historians as well as literary critics would posit that Dylan has actually become the voice of *many* generations, and it is indisputable that the scope of his influence (not limited to fame by any means) extends far beyond the borders of music or the culture of contemporary America.

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